

Sa'ad al-Hariri and the Tehran-Beirut Axis: The Case of 'Arsal

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Iran's bid to establish a land corridor that extends from Tehran to Beirut, traversing large swathes of Iraqi and Syrian territory to the Mediterranean, appears to be gaining traction.¹ To be sure, there are politicians in Beirut that refuse to allow Iran a free reign in local affairs. Nevertheless, Iran's proxy, Lebanese Hizballah, demonstrated that it has no need for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) during its recent conquest of the town of 'Arsal, which is located along the Lebanese-Syrian border.² By moving to uproot Syrian militants and expel unwanted Syrian refugees there, Hizballah went back on prior statements by its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, that it was not interested in such actions,³ and simultaneously ignored Lebanon's Sunni Prime Minister, Sa'ad al-Hariri, who had politely asked Hizballah to allow the LAF to handle Lebanese security alone.⁴ Hariri's declared opposition to Hizballah's dominance was downplayed by some analysts, such as Tony Badran, who argue that Hizballah pulls all the strings in Lebanon and that Hariri and the LAF are mere puppets who allow Tehran to impose its will.⁵ On the other hand, Susan Glasser gives Hariri the benefit of the doubt that although he cannot personally stop Hizballah, he considers the U.S. an ally and would genuinely like to see regional partners curtail the organization's influence in Lebanon.⁶ A key to grasping the extent to which Hariri can check Hizballah's influence in Lebanon lies in understanding the larger

¹ Osama al-Sharif, "[Tehran's land corridor through Syria, a reality](#)," *The Jordan Times*, June 13, 2017.

² Nazih Osseiran, "[Jabhat Fatah al-Sham \[sic\] out, Lebanese Army in](#)," [Paywall] *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), August 3, 2017.

³ "[Nasrallah: 'Arsal liberation' is army's responsibility](#)," *NOW.*, June 9, 2015.

⁴ "[Hezbollah, Syria army launch attack on Lebanese border](#)," *al-Jazeera*, July 22, 2017.

⁵ Tony Badran, "[Lebanese PM Saad Hariri Joins with Hezbollah to Con Donald Trump](#)," *Tablet Magazine*, August 2, 2017, and "[Lebanon is Another Name for Hezbollah](#)," *Tablet Magazine*, July 26, 2017.

⁶ Susan Glasser, "[Why the Middle East hated Obama but loves Trump](#)," *Politico Magazine*, July 31, 2017.

political struggle to find solutions to a number of problems ailing the state. If the Lebanese state requires external help beyond what Tehran can provide, Hariri's ability to deal with the West and Arab Gulf states may prevent Hizballah from marginalizing him, and could possibly limit Hizballah's dominance in Lebanese politics.

The evidence for Hariri's competence versus impotence exists in nearly equal measures, depending on one's perspective. Joyce Karam notes that Hariri has some political space to maneuver thanks to his successful handling recent negotiations with Washington, which secured promises of ongoing military aid for the LAF and an additional \$140 million to help Lebanon deal with the refugee crisis.⁷ Furthermore, when addressing the outside world, Hariri expresses discomfort with Hizballah's role, publicly calling the organization a "regional problem,"⁸ and his local allies say that Hizballah is preventing Lebanon from becoming an "actual state."⁹ Despite leading the parliamentary opposition Hariri was appointed prime minister last October by pro-Hizballah President Michele Aoun (a Maronite Christian), in part, because Lebanon's sectarian system requires the prime minister to be a Sunni Muslim. This unusual arrangement helps to explain why soon after returning from the United States at the end of July, Hariri was pressured by other members of the ruling coalition to backtrack and publicly give the impression that Hizballah's operation in 'Arsal was positive for Lebanon.¹⁰ Hariri's need to publicly support Hizballah at times creates the impression that he is nothing but a fig leaf for the organization.

Indeed, in early August, the commencement of the repatriation of some 8,000 refugees from 'Arsal to Idlib, in Syria, was entirely coordinated by Iran, Syria, and Hizballah following negotiations with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra), the militant organization that was defeated in that area in July. While the repatriated refugees constituted only a minute percentage of the estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon, the move provided hope to many Lebanese that a solution might be around the corner, rather than years away. For the ruling coalition, led by President Aoun, all Syrian refugees need to be repatriated to Syria as soon as possible.¹¹ The Aoun-led coalition, which includes Hizballah's political wing as well as a number of other Shi'i and Christian parties, tends to highlight the potential for Sunni jihadists to infiltrate refugee camps, as seen in the area around Arsal, in the mountains near Syria.

⁷ Joyce Karam, "[Hariri achieves three goals in Washington](http://www.alhayat.com/m/opinion/23156115#sthash.RWmZC0U6.aoHaGUvj.dpbs)," [In Arabic] *al-Hayat*, July 26, 2017.

⁸ "[Hariri from Washington: Hezbollah is a regional problem](#)" [In Arabic], *Asharq al-Awsat*, July 27, 2017.

⁹ Walid Chouqair, "[Geagea to 'al-Hayat': Let Nasrallah hand over his weapons to the Lebanese Army](#)" [In Arabic], *al-Hayat*, July 30, 2017.

¹⁰ "[Hariri: Lebanese State Liberated Arsal](#)," *Kataeb*, August 2, 2017.

¹¹ "[Aoun wants Syrian 'safe zones' to send back refugees](#)," *ANSAmid*, February 3, 2017.

Though returning all Syrian refugees as soon as possible is the dominant line in Lebanon, there are those who recognize the complexity of this problem given that the war in Syria is not over. For instance, Samir Geagea, a senior Christian politician allied with the Hariri's Future Movement as part of the anti-Syrian "March 14th Bloc" established in 2005 after the assassination of Sa'ad Hariri's father Rafiq, has argued that perhaps pro-Asad refugees should be repatriated first, since they can be settled in areas controlled by the Syrian regime without fear of reprisals.¹² This highlights the largely unspoken sectarian element of the refugee crisis, which is the fact that most of the Syrian refugees are Sunni, and many Shi'i Muslims in Lebanon, as well as some Christians, fear that their presence in Lebanon disrupts the delicate sectarian demographic balance that has emerged since the end of the fifteen year civil war in 1990. 'Arsal and its surrounding hills, for instance, contain between 45,000-60,000 refugees who are mainly Sunni, and are known to have family ties to active Syrian militants. Hizballah has long eyed 'Arsal as a threat, due to its strategic location between its headquarters in the Bekaa (*Biq'a*) Valley and the Syrian mountain area between Damascus and Homs.

Hizballah ignores the sectarian dimension in its rhetoric,¹³ instead it publicly argued that its July operation in 'Arsal against HTS was directly linked to the Syrian war, and aimed at preventing "terrorists" from establishing a base in Lebanon that would also be used to help Sunni rebels in Syria.¹⁴ Hizballah's message was intended to emphasize that its military operations are not necessarily in conflict with the jurisdiction of the Lebanese Army, which is supposed to be solely responsible for security in Lebanon, as per UN Security Council Resolution 1701.¹⁵ Yet for those critical of Hizballah, such as Samy Gemayel of the Ketaeb Party and son of former Lebanese President Amin Gemayel, Hizballah's intervention in Syria runs the risk of provoking Hizballah's opponents to take the fight to Lebanon.

Before Hizballah's operation in July, the Lebanese Army abruptly ended its own operation in 'Arsal's refugee camps, meant to curb HTS activities, when they were confronted with suicide bombers who injured several soldiers.¹⁶ For the Lebanese public, this latest fiasco was reminiscent of the LAF's failed operation in 2014 that led to the capture of dozens of Lebanese Army forces by Jabhat al-

¹² Walid Chouqair, "[Geagea to 'al-Hayat': Let Nasrallah hand over his weapons to the Lebanese Army](#)," [In Arabic] *al-Hayat*, July 30, 2017.

¹³ Though Hizballah often seeks to present itself as somewhat a-sectarian in public, expressions of sectarian polemics are common on social media, <https://twitter.com/Dalatrm/status/891649446232158208>

¹⁴ For instance, see: "[Hezbollah says mission accomplished in Arsal](#)," *PressTV*, July 30, 2017.

¹⁵ See the UN for the political statements and text of UN Security Council 1701, [here](#).

¹⁶ "[Five suicide bombers attack Lebanese army during raids](#)," *Reuters*, June 30, 2017.

Nusra and IS militants.¹⁷ So it was only following the LAF's failed attempt at arresting HTS and IS militants in 'Arsal, that Hizballah moved on its own, forcing the LAF to admit that it was no longer involved in the operation to rid 'Arsal of militants.¹⁸

As it turned out, after a group of militants linked to HTS who were previously part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) surrendered to Hizballah, HTS was forced to admit defeat. In high-level negotiations facilitated by Iran and the Asad regime, a multi-stage deal was worked out with HTS, beginning with the transfer of dead bodies of fighters on each side, and leading to a massive forced migration of 'Arsal's HTS-linked families to Syria. The current deal stands in stark contrast to a 2014 attempt by the jihadis in 'Arsal to negotiate an escape that would have allowed 1,500 people, including fighters and their families, to traverse several hundred kilometers of Syrian regime-held territory to reach the jihadi-held Raqqa province.¹⁹ The Syrian regime had been unwilling to give the LAF a guarantee for safe passage for such a large convoy of jihadi fighters, and hence the deal fell through.

Jihadi fighters were primarily in Lebanon because that's where their families had found refuge. Lebanon has on occasion detained the wives and/or children of known fighters, such as when they found and arrested the ex-wife of the IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.²⁰ Indeed, that incident shows the complicated and intertwined relationship between refugees and their links to the conflict they are fleeing. During the Syrian war, the issue of Lebanese treatment of Syrian refugees has become increasingly sensitive and volatile in the Lebanese public sphere. Sa'ad al-Hariri, like all other Lebanese politicians, claims that Lebanon has become one giant refugee camp, and moreover that Lebanon needs to rely on the United Nations and international donors for a gradual solution.²¹ Hariri's successful negotiation with Trump will help him convince both his allies and the ruling coalition in Lebanon that the UN and countries allied with the West are best able to resolve the refugee crisis. Hariri can use this process as a starting point to reduce Syrian influence—as a continuation of the process that began in 2006 with the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon after three decades of direct involvement there.

¹⁷ See my previous *Tel Aviv Notes*, Vol. 8, No. 22, December 10, 2014, "[An alliance between Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State on the Lebanese-Syrian frontier?](#)."

¹⁸ Najia al-Houssari, "[Arsal is not our battle](#)," *Arab News*, July 24, 2017.

¹⁹ Jean Aziz, "[Arsal: The battle that begins a long war](#)," *al-Monitor*, August 11, 2014.

²⁰ For more context on that see, "[ISIS leader's ex-wife: Baghdadi used to be 'a normal family man'](#)," *Jerusalem Post*, May 1, 2016.

²¹ "[PM Hariri: Lebanon at 'breaking point' due to refugees](#)," *al-Jazeera*, April 1, 2017.

There was a stark contrast between Hariri's Washington confession that he wished things were done differently in Lebanon,²² and Hizballah's trumpeting of a hard-won victory in 'Arsal. It used media outlets such as *al-Manar* and *al-Mayadeen* to dramatically reveal the headquarters of Abu Malik al-Tali, the HTS Emir, where he was arrested in a cave in Jarud 'Arsal. Indeed, widely shared videos showed Hizballah planting a dual flag with Hizballah's on top and Lebanon's on the bottom in the area formerly controlled by HTS near 'Arsal. In the days after the victory, Hizballah invited some 60 Arab and international journalists to witness the effects of their operation first hand.²³

Despite the military and propaganda coup, the Lebanese political opposition still chose to speak out. For instance, Samir Gagea, head of the Lebanese Forces Party, which is allied with Hariri's Future movement in the March 14th coalition against the ruling majority that includes Hizballah, went so far as to say in an interview in late July, "as long as Hizballah exists, it is seven times harder to create an actual state (*dawla fa'aliya*)."²⁴ The March 14th bloc has always maintained that Syrian and Iranian influence undermine Lebanese sovereignty, though in practice it has not been able to force Hizballah to disarm and distance itself from Syria and Iran.

Indeed, one of the key issues that Hariri came to Washington to discuss was the issue of U.S. sanctions against Hizballah that were proposed in early July. Hariri argued that broad sanctions would harm the Lebanese banking sector and indirectly exacerbate other issues in Lebanon, such as the Syrian refugee issue. No doubt Hariri is not entirely able to ignore President Aoun, who has often defended Hizballah's continued military procurement and condemned any attempts to use sanctions to target Hizballah's financing. As a shot across the bow to warn Hariri not to encourage Congress to pass sanctions, Aoun announced clearly that such sanctions would do "great damage to Lebanon and its people."²⁵

Hariri brought a particularly compelling message to Washington, which was that while the U.S. should go easy on Lebanon, it can take any measures it wants to directly harm individuals in Hizballah, and that anything that combats Iranian

²² ["This is what Hariri said about what Hizballah was doing in Jarud 'Arsal,"](#) *OTV Lebanon*, July 26, 2017. Reportedly, he said in response to a direct question at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on July 26th, 2017, "If you are asking me whether I agree with what Hezbollah is doing in Jarud [Arsal], I would say, no I prefer that the Lebanese Army would do this [operation]." Author's translation.

²³ Liz Sly and Susan Heidamous, "Hezbollah takes journalists on tour of remote Lebanon," *The Washington Post*, July 31, 2017.

²⁴ Raghda Zeidan, "[Gaegae: al-Nusra's exit from Arsal is not a victory for Lebanon and Hezbollah's attack is in the context of its war for Assad and Iran](#)," [In Arabic], *Micro Syria*, July 30, 2017.

²⁵ Lisa Barington, "[As U.S. targets Hezbollah, Lebanon lobbies against more sanctions](#)," *Reuters*, June 2, 2017.

power in the region should be done.²⁶ As demonstrated by the results, Hariri gained the friendly ear of the sitting U.S. president: securing the ongoing funding of the LAF that was feared to be in jeopardy, \$140 million in aid for Syrian refugees, and preventing the U.S. from enacting broad sanctions against the Lebanese banking industry. Yet just days later, Hariri was forced to admit that Hizballah had helped the Lebanese state, in direct contradiction to his March 14th ally Gagea who said the opposite: namely, expelling 'Arsal's population only served the interests of Asad and Iran. A cynical view of Hariri's position, such as that of Tony Badran, would tend to see such public statements as evidence of the reality that Hariri is powerless. Yet a more sympathetic interlocutor, like Susan Glasser, would echo Hariri's message to the Americans, which appears to be that Hizballah is not the same thing as Lebanon, and that he, for one, will not oppose any external efforts to limit the organization, as long as Lebanon itself is protected from harm.

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²⁶ Paul D. Shinkman, "[Trump didn't misspeak on Hezbollah](#)," *US News & World Report*, July 26, 2017.